

WORLD'S CHOICE?

Britain, Europe, empire and the making of a historical myth

There was Jean Cabot, then the English East India Company, then a whole Empire, then a Commonwealth - and a foreign policy, the "splendid isolation". But did the United Kingdom really choose to look to the world rather than to the continent? And who keeps this myth alive?

01 The myth of the "world's choice".

We know the famous formula of Lord Palmerston, mastermind of British foreign policy for much of the 19th century: "England has no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests". And these permanent interests remain deeply rooted in Europe! We saw it with the Crimean War, for example, and the intervention in Greece in the 19th century.

The story that many Conservatives, and not just Conservatives, tell us is that Britain only entered Europe for economic reasons, in 1973 during the oil shock (and too late!), and that it has no other interest in Europe. It seems to me that there are others, especially in the university field for example: most British universities receive a lot of grants from European...

02 Great Britain, United Kingdom, Empire, Commonwealth, European Union: overlapping identities

While Britishness was formed overseas to distinguish itself from the other populations of the Empire, Englishness is the idea that it is England that is the origin of the United Kingdom and the Empire, that Westminster and power is in London, that everything emanates from Englishness. It can even be argued that this is one of the great issues of today, if we consider that the English voted for the Brexit much more widely than the Scots or the Northern Irish?

The Brexit was interpreted as a revival of imperial culture. But it can also be interpreted in the same movement as the resurgence of pre-imperial, pre-British identities. It is clear how difficult it is to define Englishness in relation to Britishness: we see a white, English identity, which is reflected in the strong rise of racism in Britain. The Brexit campaign resulted in the murder of Jo Cox during the week of the vote! There was also an explosion of racist acts, including concerning Eastern Europeans because they spoke Polish in the streets...

03 Decentring the Empire

This British and English-speaking historiography underwent a shift in the 1990s, which was summed up by the title of Durba Gosh and Dane Kennedy's book "Decentring Empire", which focused on all those circulations that escape London and Britain. In all areas, we can observe these more or less intense connections between the different territories of the Empire. These bodies of doctrine, these political skills circulated between India, Egypt, Ireland - Ireland is a reservoir of colonisers and a country considered a colony in many respects! This "imperial web" has several poles in Asia, America and Africa.

The Indian Historical School, which was born in India but has developed a lot in the United States and Great Britain, seeks to "provincialise Europe" by putting these colonies back at the centre of the narrative, by writing their own history, supported by local archives... It is a true alternative historiography.

UNDERSTAND & DISCUSS

Answer with the text in front of you. Each question refers to one paragraph.

Name: _____ Class: _____

01 / The myth of the "world's choice"

PARAGRAPH 1

According to the author, why does Lord Palmerston's formula not prove that Britain turned away from Europe? Give one historical example.

PARAGRAPH 2

Which political narrative about Britain joining Europe does the author challenge? Give one example of a non-economic connection to Europe.

02 / Overlapping identities

PARAGRAPH 1

How does the author distinguish "Englishness" from "Britishness"? What example from the Brexit vote is used?

PARAGRAPH 2

What two different interpretations of Brexit does the author mention? What social consequences are described?

03 / Decentring the Empire

PARAGRAPH 1

What does the expression "imperial web" mean? Name at least two territories mentioned in the text.

PARAGRAPH 2

What does it mean to "provincialise Europe"? How can this approach challenge a London-centred history of empire?

FINAL TASK / 3-MINUTE ORAL PRESENTATION

Question: Who keeps the myth of Britain's "world's choice" alive? Choose ONE of the three sections above and explain how it helps answer the question. Identify the people, political ideas or ways of writing history that sustain or challenge the myth. Use two precise examples from your chosen section. End with your own clear answer.

Suggested structure: introduce the myth → explain your section → answer the question.